ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A24

NEW YORK TIMES
20 March, 1985

Backstopping the Arms Talks

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 19 — On Saturday, March 9, shortly after President Reagan had decided what approach the United States would take in the new round of arms control talks with the Soviet Union that would start three days later in Geneva, Louis Nosenzo of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency called a meeting of various Government officials who would be involved in the talks from the Washington end. They translated the President's instructions into a 20-page telegram.

That telegram was then sent to American officials already in Geneva, representing the first, and main, section of an umbilical cord of daily coded telegrams and scrambled telephone calls that now connects the American delegation in Switzerland with officials back in Washington, where the real decisions are made.

Much of the communication is routine, doing no more than informing officials at each end what is going on. But sometimes it is more than that — perhaps a private call from a member of the Geneva delegation, say a military officer, to alert his chief back home that he should try to stop a particular line of argument or begin stressing another viewpoint in order to influence the talks and nudge them in a direction more amenable to his branch of the armed services. At other times, the communication sets off alarm bells, as when the delegation wants new instructions, in a hurry, so as to take advantage of what it sees as a negotiating opportunity.

So far, with Soviet and American teams in Geneva doing little more than describing their opening positions, Administration officials report that most of the messages passing back and forth over this communications system have been routine, with a minimal amount of drama. Nonetheless, the machinery and links are in place, waiting.

Mr. Nosenzo, a career civil servant who has worked for several Republican and Democratic Administrations, holds the title of deputy director of the Strategic Programs Bureau in the arms control agency. He is in charge of overall "backstopping," as the Washington-based work is called. And his position is essentially the equivalent of that of a deputy assistant secretary of state, or a fourth-tier player.

Working with him are two other backstoppers — R. Lucas Fischer, chief of the arms control agency's technology division and the man responsible for the talks on medium-range nuclear forces, and Victor Alessi, chief of the strategic affairs division and the man responsible for the talks on strategic-range nuclear weapons.

Kenneth L. Adelman, director of the Arms Control and Disarmanent Agency, describes the backstoppers' role as essentially responding to requests from the Geneva negotiating teams for facts and clarifications. The Geneva delegation might want to know, for example, how many Soviet SS-20 medium-range missiles are now deployed and whether that number can be used in a presentation to the Soviet delegation. To protect intelligence collection sources and methods, the intelligence agencies in Washington might not want to reveal their knowledge of the current total too quickly.

Two Kinds of Requests

When a request for factual information such as missile numbers arrives in the telegram code room of the arms control agency, it is delivered to the backstopping group chairman, who then sends copies to his counterparts in the Pentagon, State Department, Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council staff in the White House. They then draft a response and send it around to the same counterparts. If the situation requires, they hold a meeting.

But if "policy" issues are involved, such as a request for change in instructions, the backstoppers turn the matter over to an Interdepartment Group, or I.G., under the chairmanship of Lieut. Gen. John T. Chain Jr., director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs. This group operates at the Assistant Secretary level as a working forum for the Senior Arms Control Group headed by Robert C. McFarlane, the President's national security adviser.

Such is the formal system of communicating and negotiating. Most of the time it works as set up. But when things begin to happen in Geneva, officials acknowledge, a more informal network often comes into play, though there has been little of this thus far in the early stages of negotiations.

On the 'Secure' Phones

Officials say a typical informal approach would occur should Max M. Kampelman, the chief United States negotiator in Geneva, reach for one of the eight "secure" telephones and begin some private lobbying with Mr. McFarlane or Secretary of State George P. Shultz. Secure phones scramble voices at one end and then unscramble them at the other end to foil unwanted listeners.

More often than not, however, such lobbying occurs on a less lofty individualized basis, with members of the delegation telephoning their own agency counterparts back in Washington without the approval of the delegation chairman.

In the normal course of things, for example, military members of the Geneva teams communicate with their military superiors in the Pentagon through their own telephone system or through a military telegraphic system that goes directly to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, bypassing not only the State Department and arms control agency but the Secretary of Defense as well. The Central Intelligence Agency members of the Geneva teams also have their separate telegraphic channels of communications.

But basically, at least for the next several weeks, this vast communications system is at ease.

"Kampelman and company will take up a lot of time before they even exhaust the existing 20 pages of instructions, and the Russians are going through their warmups too," said a high-ranking Administration official.